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Arguing From Cognitive Science of Religion

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2018

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citation for published version (APA)

Van Eyghen, H. M. R. (2018). *Arguing From Cognitive Science of Religion: Cognitive Science of Religion and its Epistemic Implications*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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Summary

The main question in this thesis is whether recent theories from Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) imply a negative epistemic status of religious belief. This question can be answered in multiple ways: CSR-theories could make truth claims that stand in conflict with religious truth claims; CSR-theories could show that religious belief is unreliably formed; CSR-theories could show that religious experiences are wholly natural phenomena and hence do not justify religious beliefs; and CSR-theories could undermine the Consensus Gentium Argument. I assess whether CSR-theories can indeed do so.

Before assessing the epistemic impact, I first discuss what religious beliefs are and what CSR-theories state. In chapter 1, I discuss what religious beliefs are. Since most CSR-theories have one subclass of religious beliefs, i.e. supernatural beliefs, as their explanandum, I devote most of the chapter to those beliefs. I also flesh out some more specific supernatural beliefs by giving examples from three traditions: Christianity, Hinduism and Spiritualism.

In chapter 2 I discuss 11 cognitive theories of religious belief. I give a broad overview of the theories and the empirical data to which they refer. Where available, I also discuss the main criticisms. Before discussing the theories, I start with some preliminary remarks about adaptation, group selection and cognitive mechanisms.

In chapter 3, I consider whether any of the 11 theories makes a truth claim that is incompatible with some religious truth claim. I discuss three potential conflicts: a conflict between the causes of religious belief, a conflict over the role of revelatory experiences, and a conflict over the function of rituals. I argue that there is no conflict in either case.

In chapter 4, I consider if the 11 theories show that religious beliefs are unreliably formed. Since unreliably formed beliefs are often regarded as epistemically tainted, this would affect the epistemic status of religious beliefs. I survey four existing arguments for unreliability and argue that they are unconvincing because they wrongfully oppose evolutionary forces and divine action, overstate the scope of what CSR-theories explain, or uncritically accept naturalistic presuppositions in CSR-theories.

In chapter 5, I develop a new argument based on CSR-theories. The argument states that religious beliefs based on religious experiences are unjustified because CSR-theories show that these are wholly natural phenomena. If religious experiences are wholly natural phenomena, they cannot justify belief in the existence of anything supernatural. I argue that the argument is unconvincing because the scope of CSR-theories is likely not sufficiently wide to conclude that all religious experiences are wholly natural.

In the final chapter I discuss the impact of CSR-theories on the Consensus Gentium Argument for the existence of God. The argument states that the wide occurrence of supernatural beliefs provides evidence for God's existence. I argue that CSR-theories only have a limited impact. This is so because they defuse only some reasons for granting evidential weight to a wide occurrence of supernatural beliefs.

In an epilogue, I discuss how my thesis relates to scientism, the thesis that 'science explains everything' or 'science has shown that many common sense beliefs (like religious beliefs) are false'.